

## COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE FROM OTHER CULTURES

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**People from other countries or cultures sometimes remark** that their encounters with housing providers have not been satisfactory. Here is a sampling of what they've experienced:

- Leasing agents who don't allow them to fill out rental applications
- Apartment managers who are put off by foreign accents
- Property owners who will not accept purchase offers on houses for sale

**Housing providers sometimes tell us** that their encounters with applicants or residents from other countries or cultures have been dissatisfactory. Here are examples of what they've encountered:

- Applicants who cannot read the rental application forms
- Residents who are casual about being on time for meetings or rent payments
- Residents who don't understand or follow the tenancy rules and regulations

Most housing providers know that communication breakdowns can happen any time, anywhere. Differences in perspective between managers and residents can become virtual walls, making the exchange of information seem impossible. Conflicts of this kind are generally worked out one way or another – either through persistence and cooperation, or in extreme cases, through legal action.

What about barriers of a more fundamental kind – those having to do with **language**? How should a manager respond when a person with limited-English speaking ability makes a rental inquiry? What should a landlord do when a non-English speaking resident simply doesn't understand the rules?

**We know that it is illegal to discriminate against people on the basis of national origin or ancestry. So what, if anything, can housing providers do to maximize communication in the application process and beyond with immigrants and others whose culture or language differs?**

Housing providers may not have the finances or the inclination to do business in any language other than English. No one expects a landlord or manager to master the dozens of languages spoken by people in the region. Nor are they expected to translate their promotional materials, applications, or rental agreements to meet the language needs of all applicants. (Though if federal funding is involved, there may be some "Limited English Proficiency" requirements.)

Still, a landlord cannot turn away an applicant simply because of a heavy accent, or because communication with a limited-English speaker presents an extra challenge. Every reasonable effort must be made to usher such applicants through the normal rental procedures in English, just as would be done for fluent English-speaking applicants.

**Here are some things housing providers can do to improve communications:**

- **Speak slowly and use simple words with those who do not speak English very well.** If someone does not speak English well, don't assume that person is unable to communicate or that they are uneducated. English is one of the most difficult to learn, and for many people, English may actually be the third, fourth, or fifth language that they speak. Avoid repeating misunderstood remarks, or talking louder to get the point across. If necessary, rephrase complex words or sentences into uncomplicated, clear language. Communicate by using simple words with longer pauses, repeating important information, and avoiding legal jargon.
- **Do not be put off by actions that may be part of a person's cultural behavior.** Learning American culture takes time. Many immigrants practice cultural norms that can be misinterpreted by Americans. For example, in many cultures, it is inappropriate to look someone in the eye while speaking. Someone who looks down or away from you while speaking is showing respect, not rudeness or disinterest. Pointing at someone may also be considered rude behavior. Be alert for situations where interactions with others may be impacted by cultural differences.
- **American culture is very time-driven and punctuality is important, but some cultures are event-driven, and other people's concept of time may be different.** If someone is a fifteen late to an appointment or a day late on the rent, it may be because that person is unaware of American norms. A gentle reminder of your policies will be appreciated and will avoid future misunderstandings.
- **Not all immigrants have Section 8 vouchers.** Some immigrants participate in the Section 8 program, but not all. For most, Section 8 is a short-term transition as they make their way in America. Most people like to work hard and have goals of purchasing their own homes. Do not stereotype Section 8 participants by assuming that they would be less than desirable residents.
- **Social services are available to assist.** There are a number of governmental and private social service agencies and many churches which assist new residents who settle here. These agencies are also available to owners and managers who are having difficulties communicating with applicants or residents. Some provide translation services and publish flyers and pamphlets on apartment rules and care of units in several languages.

**Most important, always treat others with kindness and respect.** Every member of society is a teacher. Immigrants learn how American society works by observing the way others treat them.

Adapted from *Fair Housing Update* articles by the Seattle Office for Civil Rights:  
"Say What?" by Sam Hendricks and "Reaching Out to African Immigrants – We All Belong!" by Satu Muldrow

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